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**ABSTRACT**

A pilot study surveyed book reviewers for "Journalism Quarterly" to determine what kind of people write reviews, why they write reviews, what they think about the quality of book reviews, and what they think about the ethics-related problems associated with book reviewing. Subjects, 78 (out of 92) reviewers for "Journalism Quarterly" randomly selected from the list of reviewers who published reviews between 1983 and 1988, responded to a questionnaire. Results indicated that (1) most reviewers were white, middle-aged males who held doctorates, taught at a large university and were tenured full or associate professors; (2) 44 percent wrote reviews out of a sense of professional "duty" and a belief that the experience would help them grow professionally; (3) 70 percent thought favorable reviews could lead to increased readership of a book, although more than one-half thought the reviews should be more critical; and (4) despite concerns about ethics-related problems in book reviewing, the reviewers seemed convinced that there was little, if any, race or sex bias at work in "Journalism Quarterly" reviews. (Two tables of data are attached.) (RS)

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Mass Communication and Society

# The Joys, Heartaches and Ethics of Reviewing Books For *Journalism Quarterly* : Perceptions of Reviewers

K. Tim Wulfemeyer
Associate Professor
Department of Journalism
San Diego State University

Donald Sneed
Professor
Department of Journalism
San Diego State University

Daniel Riffe
Associate Professor
Department of Journalism
University of Alabama

Roger L. Van Ommeren
Professor
Department of Journalism
Baylor University

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K. Tim Wulfemeyer

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# The Joys, Heartaches and Ethics of Reviewing Books For *Journalism Quarterly* : Perceptions of Reviewers

Despite the fact that books are reviewed in a host of academic journals, few systematic studies of book reviewing have been conducted. What has been done includes interviews with reviewers who provide a list of "do's and don'ts" in book reviewing(Croft, 1978), opinionated articles that glibly conclude such things as "only an innocent would deny that many academic reviewers use reviews to help friends, demolish enemies and further their own careers,"(Pool, 1988) or wistful laments bemoaning the perception that book reviewing is a form of "secondhand scholarship"(Murdoch, 1978).

One purpose of this pilot study was an attempt to bring more scientific rigor to the study of book reviewing by surveying a systematic sample of *Journalism Quarterly* (*JQ* ) book reviewers to determine what kind of people write reviews, why they write reviews, what they think about the quality of book reviews and what they think about ethics-related problems associated with book reviewing. *JQ* was selected because it is recognized as one of the leading scholarly journals in journalism and mass communication.

The question of whether book reviewers go about their work in a highly ethical manner was raised in a recent *The Chronicle of Higher Education* article(Pool, 1988). The title of that article, "Too Many Reviews of Scholarly Books Are Puffy, Nasty or Poorly Written," underscores the notion that the ethics of book reviewing may leave a lot to be desired. Pool notes that sometimes editors look for a biased reviewer in the hope of obtaining a provocative review rather than the bland commentary that seems so common in academic reviewing.

Pool decries how often reviewers and editors fail to treat books fairly, because they have turf to protect, scores to settle and axes to grind. She says such self-absorbed attitudes lead to reviews that neglect to evaluate or even describe the book being reviewed and instead feature discussions of issues of interest to reviewers.

It seems appropriate that articles about book reviewing contain criticism of the process. Book reviewing requires critical writing and critical writing deserves to be criticized. Still, many of the articles border on the acrimonious. John Tebbel(1969) laments the lack of constructive criticism:

**By this time, it is no secret that critical writing in America has fallen upon evil days. There is, to be sure, a greater abundance of it than ever before, but any assiduous and informed reader...can only conclude that...the critics are doing little enough to save the country from its slow descent into a sea of the second most popular four-letter word.**

Tebbel also maintains that it is a "great sin" for a scholarly book to be readable. He says "the worst mistake a serious academic author can make is to be popular," and that academic book reviewing is handicapped by the fact that "professors-reviewers are well aware that their future books may well be reviewed by the man they are reviewing."

Zena Sutherland is not as caustic in her views of book reviewing, but she does caution reviewers to avoid certain pitfalls: taking for granted that the author is authoritative, not checking facts for veracity, being more concerned with writing a "clever" review than with telling people about the strengths and weaknesses of the book, and failing to balance every review using such practical considerations as format, type size and potential usefulness against such literary qualities as style, sequencing, stereotyping and plot development(Croft, 1978).

Concerns about the ethics of book reviewers are not new, of course. About 70 years ago, I. A. Richards complained that a fallacy of "doctrinal adhesion" plagues many book reviews(Ehrenkrantz, 1977). "Doctrinal adhesion" means the value of a book corresponds to the acceptability of its ideology, and, according to Ehrenkrantz, "the critic driven by doctrinal viewpoint is virtually unable to review the material he cannot distort."

Ehrenkrantz complains that too often reviewers review the subject matter of a book rather than the talent of its author. He bemoans the fact that too many reviewers misread texts because they allow their biased preconceptions to color their judgments.

Bias was the subject of one of the few scientific studies conducted on book reviewing. Michael Moore(1978) found a sex bias in book reviews. He discovered that if reviewer and author were of the same sex, reviews were more favorable than if reviewer and author were not of the same sex. He suggested that such bias was consistent with findings that show in "real-life" settings, each sex is biased in favor of its own members.

Gail Pool(1988) believes that if the quality of book reviews is to improve, editors and reviewers will have to define more clearly the ethics of their tasks and address more directly the complex questions of fairness that are at the heart of their work. She is not overly optimistic that such clarification will take place, because too many universities label scholarly book reviewing as "hackwork" and do not take it as seriously as most other forms of academic writing.

Murdoch(1978) believes book reviewing, if taken seriously, can stimulate scholarly discussion and debate. He suggests that reviewers take great care to avoid personal acrimony and urges reviewers to objectively evaluate a book on its merits. Among the things that he says a quality book review should do are:

1. Provide a summary of the book's contents/theme.
2. Provide bibliographic data about a book--size, format, price.
3. Take issue with certain points in the book when warranted.
4. Draw attention to a book that might otherwise escape attention.
5. Evaluate a book within the context of its discipline as a whole.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What are the demographic characteristics of *Journalism Quarterly* book reviewers?

2. What are the motivations of the reviewers for writing book reviews?

3. How do reviewers rate the quality of book reviews in *Journalism Quarterly* ?

4. What are reviewer perceptions of selected ethics-related issues associated with book reviewing?

## METHODS

After a literature review, a 100-question survey instrument was developed. Pre-testing of the questionnaire with five journalism educators led to the elimination of 21 questions and the rewording of several questions.

The final five-page questionnaire consisted of 39 Likert-type statements with a five-point response range of "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." Respondents were also asked to rank 11 selected motivations for writing book reviews on a 1-10 scale ranging from "very important" to "very unimportant." The survey instrument had 23 demographics-related questions and six open-end questions.

Subjects were selected at random from a list of *Journalism Quarterly* book reviewers who published reviews between 1983 and1988. Of the 92 questionnaires mailed, 78 usable ones were returned(85%). Only one mailing was conducted.

# FINDINGS

**Demographics**

About 62% of the *JQ* book reviewers who responded to the survey were male. The average age was about 45. Almost 90% were caucasian. About 97% taught at a university and almost 90% had a doctorate. About 33% held the rank of full professor, 45% were associate professors and 19% were assistant professors. Almost 75% were tenured.

The reviewers averaged 11 refereed journal articles and 14 refereed convention papers and about 14 years of academic experience. They belonged to an average of three professional associations.

About 80% were employed by a public university. Nearly 75% taught in schools with enrollments greater than 10,000. About 55% worked for institutions that offered doctoral degrees, 30% for institutions that offered master's degrees and 13% for institutions that offered only bachelor's degrees.

In the past five years, reviewers averaged three book reviews in *Journalism Quarterly* and five reviews in other journals. Favorable book reviews outnumbered unfavorable reviews by a margin of 2-to-1.

About 70% believed favorable book reviews can increase the readership of a book. Slightly more than half thought favorable reviews can help advance the careers of authors, but only about 10% thought unfavorable reviews can help advance the careers of reviewers.

About 60% of the *JQ* book reviewers reported they received their assignments from the book review editor. About 19% said they either volunteered or were assigned a book to review, 12% said they volunteered and 5% said they received assignments in other ways.

About 90% reported they subscribed to *Journalism Quarterly* and 82% said they regularly read *JQ* book reviews.

**Motivations**

When asked about their main motivation for writing book reviews, 44% of the *JQ* book reviewers listed "professional growth/duty," 28% listed "enjoyment," 6% listed "promotion/tenure," 5% listed "to get a free book" and 13% listed miscellaneous other reasons.

When asked to rate 11 selected reasons for writing book reviews, the *JQ* book reviewers rated "to provide scholars and graduate students with a quick look at content" as the most important reason. (See TABLE 1) "Listing the strengths of the book," "letting people know whether the book is worth reading/adopting," "listing the weaknesses of the book," and "drawing attention to a work that might otherwise escape attention" were also rated highly.

About 70% of the *JQ* book reviewers agreed that writing a book review was a rewarding experience. (See TABLE 2) Almost 30% thought writing a review was a lot of work that reaped very few benefits. Only about 12% indicated that writing a book review counts heavily in tenure/promotion decisions. Almost all agreed that publishing an article in *JQ* was more important for receiving tenure/promotion than publishing a book review in *JQ*. Only about 5% felt a book review and an article should carry the same weight. In fact, about 35% felt book reviewing could be described as a form of "second-class scholarship."

**Quality**

More than 70% agreed that most of the important books in journalism and mass communication were reviewed in *Journalism Quarterly*, although only about 40% said such reviews were published in a timely manner. (See TABLE 2) About 65% felt most books were reviewed by experts. More than 70% believed the quality and length of *JQ* book reviews were good.

Almost 63% thought most *JQ* book reviews were usually favorable and 54% felt reviews should be more critical. Only about 5% believed writing unfavorable review would negatively affect a reviewer's chances of being asked to write future reviews and only about 5% said an editor had ever asked for revisions or tried to influence a review.

About 20% felt that the *JQ* book reviewing process would be more credible if two reviews of each book--one by a professional mass communicator and the other by an academic--were published simultaneously.

**Ethics**

Few of the reviewers felt there was any race or sex bias in *JQ* book reviews; however, a relatively large number believed reviewers write more favorable reviews of books written by people they know personally. (See TABLE 2) While about 63% of the reviewers thought "friendship" affected reviews, only 23% reported they usually gave more favorable reviews to books written by people they knew personally. About 40% suggested it was best that reviewers and authors NOT know each other personally.

About 72% believed the prestige of an author sometimes influences reviewers, but only about 35% said they personally were sometimes influenced by the prestige of an author. Less than 30% agreed that the more

prestigious the author, the more likely a review would be favorable and less than 20% said reviewers write favorable reviews so authors will think well of them.

Almost 90% said book reviewers should read the entire book before writing a review even though "only" 78% reported they personally always read the entire book.

## DISCUSSION

The book reviewers who took part in this study were a reasonably homogeneous group. Most were white, middle-aged males who held doctorates, taught at a large university and were tenured full or associate professors.

In light of such homogeneity and the commonality of the subjects' book reviewing experiences, it was not too surprising that their responses to most of the survey questions were relatively consistent and somewhat predictable. Still, their perceptions of the importance, quality and ethics of book reviewing provide valuable insights into a common, but rarely scientifically studied scholarly endeavor.

The main motivation for the *JQ* book reviewers was a sense of "duty" to the profession and a belief that the experience would help them "grow" professionally. The reviewers also felt a responsibility to provide scholars and students with information about books--summary of content, strengths, and weaknesses.

Two comments written in response to open-end questions summarize the general feelings about how and why book reviews should be written:

**"Reviewing broadens knowledge, sharpens writing skills, is fun and contributes to the dissemination of knowledge."**

**"Book reviews must offer insightful comments, responsible criticism and knowledgeable commentary."**

**"Book reviewing helps me learn, grow and contribute."**

Even though most of the reviewers believed book reviewing was a personally rewarding experience, they recognized that the effort carried little weight in tenure/promotion decisions and more than one-third of them agreed that book reviewing could be described as "second-class scholarship."

More than two-thirds of the reviewers thought favorable reviews could lead to increased readership of a book and more than half thought favorable reviews could have a positive effect on an author's career. Less than one in ten believed writing unfavorable reviews could have a positive effect on a reviewer's career.

Most of the reviewers rated the quality of *JQ* book reviews as good, although more than one-half believed that reviews should be more critical. About one-third suggested *JQ* book reviews should be published in a more timely fashion and about one-fifth felt the *JQ* book reviewing process would be improved if a professional mass communicator AND an academic reviewed each book.

Despite concerns about ethics-related problems in book reviewing, the *JQ* reviewers seemed convinced that there was little, if any, race or sex bias at work in *JQ* reviews; however, there was some concern that personal friendships and the perceived high status of an author might lead to more favorable reviews.

Some cautions should be used in any attempt to generalize the findings of this study to broader populations. Because subjects were selected at random and the return rate was quite high, it is likely that the sample is representative of *JQ* book reviewers from the last five years; however, it might not be representative of *JQ* reviewers from other eras and/or other journalism and mass communication publications.

The "personal stake" that the reviewers likely had in the subject matter might have tended to color their judgments and compromise their objectivity. Some may have been adverse to "biting the hand that feeds them," too.

Another limitation of this pilot study is that it represents the perceptions of reviewers only. Authors, publishers and *JQ* subscribers were not sampled. In addition, systematic content analyses of *JQ* reviews were not conducted to either verify or contradict the accuracy of reviewer perceptions.

Future research is planned that will survey authors, publishers and *JQ* subscribers to obtain their perceptions of the quality and ethics of *JQ* book reviews. Content analyses of *JQ* book reviews will also be performed and book reviewing in other journalism and mass communication journals will be studied.

Despite its limitations and the obvious need for more research, this pilot study is an important first step in a long-term, planned program of scholarly inquiry into the joys, heartaches and ethics of book reviewing in the field of journalism and mass communication.

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**TABLE 1**

Rankings of Reasons for Writing Book Reviews*

| REASON | MEAN RATING |
|---|---|
| Providing scholars and grad students with a look at content | 8.9 |
| Listing the strengths of a book | 8.6 |
| Letting people know if a book is worth reading | 8.6 |
| Letting people know if a book if worth adopting for class | 8.2 |
| Listing the weaknesses of a book | 7.9 |
| Drawing attention to a book that might otherwise be missed | 7.8 |
| Offering insights that may have escaped author's attention | 6.5 |
| Engaging in a dialogue with colleagues | 5.6 |
| Increasing the reviewer's name recognition | 2.7 |
| Helping the reviewer obtain tenure/promotion | 2.5 |
| Getting a free copy of a book | 2.5 |

*Range 1-10 with "10" being "very important" and "1" being very unimportant

## TABLE 2

Reviewer Agreement With Selected Statements in Percent**

| STATEMENT | AGREE | DISAGREE | MEAN* |
|---|---|---|---|
| **MOTIVATION** | | | |
| Writing a review is a rewarding experience | 77 | 3 | 3.9 |
| Writing a review is a lot of work with few benefits | 28 | 59 | 2.6 |
| Book reviews count heavily for tenure/promotion | 12 | 80 | 1.9 |
| JQ articles are more important than reviews for T/P | 95 | 3 | 4.7 |
| JQ articles and reviews should count equally for T/P | 5 | 88 | 1.7 |
| Book reviewing is a sort of "second-class" scholarship | 35 | 46 | 2.8 |
| **QUALITY** | | | |
| Most of the important books are reviewed in JQ | 71 | 6 | 3.7 |
| JQ reviews are published in a timely fashion | 42 | 37 | 3.0 |
| JQ uses experts to review books | 65 | 6 | 3.7 |
| Generally, the quality of JQ book reviews is good | 74 | 10 | 3.7 |
| Generally, the length of JQ book reviews is adequate | 77 | 12 | 3.8 |
| JQ book reviews are usually favorable | 63 | 10 | 3.6 |
| JQ book reviews should be more critical | 54 | 15 | 3.5 |
| Unfavorable reviews mean few other reviews likely | 5 | 32 | 2.6 |
| JQ book review editors rarely ask for revisions | 45 | 4 | 3.6 |
| JQ book review editors attempt to influence reviewers | 6 | 73 | 1.9 |
| A pro and an academic should review each book | 18 | 55 | 2.4 |

**TABLE 2 (continued)**

| | AGREE | DISAGREE | MEAN |
|---|---|---|---|
| **ETHICS** | | | |
| Same race reviewer and author=more favorable review | 3 | 60 | 2.0 |
| Reviewer and author should be of the same race | 1 | 78 | 1.6 |
| Female reviewers are tougher on male authors | 8 | 59 | 2.1 |
| Male reviewers are tougher on female authors | 9 | 56 | 2.2 |
| Males are more critical reviewers than females | 3 | 49 | 2.3 |
| Reviewer and author should be of the same sex | 3 | 76 | 1.7 |
| If reviewer knows author=more favorable review | 63 | 14 | 3.6 |
| I give more favorable reviews to authors I know | 23 | 47 | 2.6 |
| Reviewers should NOT know authors | 41 | 35 | 3.1 |
| Reviewers sometimes influenced by prestige of author | 72 | 8 | 3.8 |
| I am sometimes influenced by prestige of author | 36 | 44 | 2.8 |
| Prestigious author is less likely to get "bad" review | 28 | 26 | 3.0 |
| "Good" reviews written so authors will like reviewers | 17 | 46 | 2.6 |
| Reviewers should read entire book | 89 | 6 | 4.5 |

***"Strongly Agree" and "Agree" categories collapsed.
"Disagree" and "Strongly Disagree" categories collapsed.
"Neither Agree/Disagree" category not reported.

*Range 1-5 with "5" being "Strongly Agree" and "1" being "Strongly Disagree"